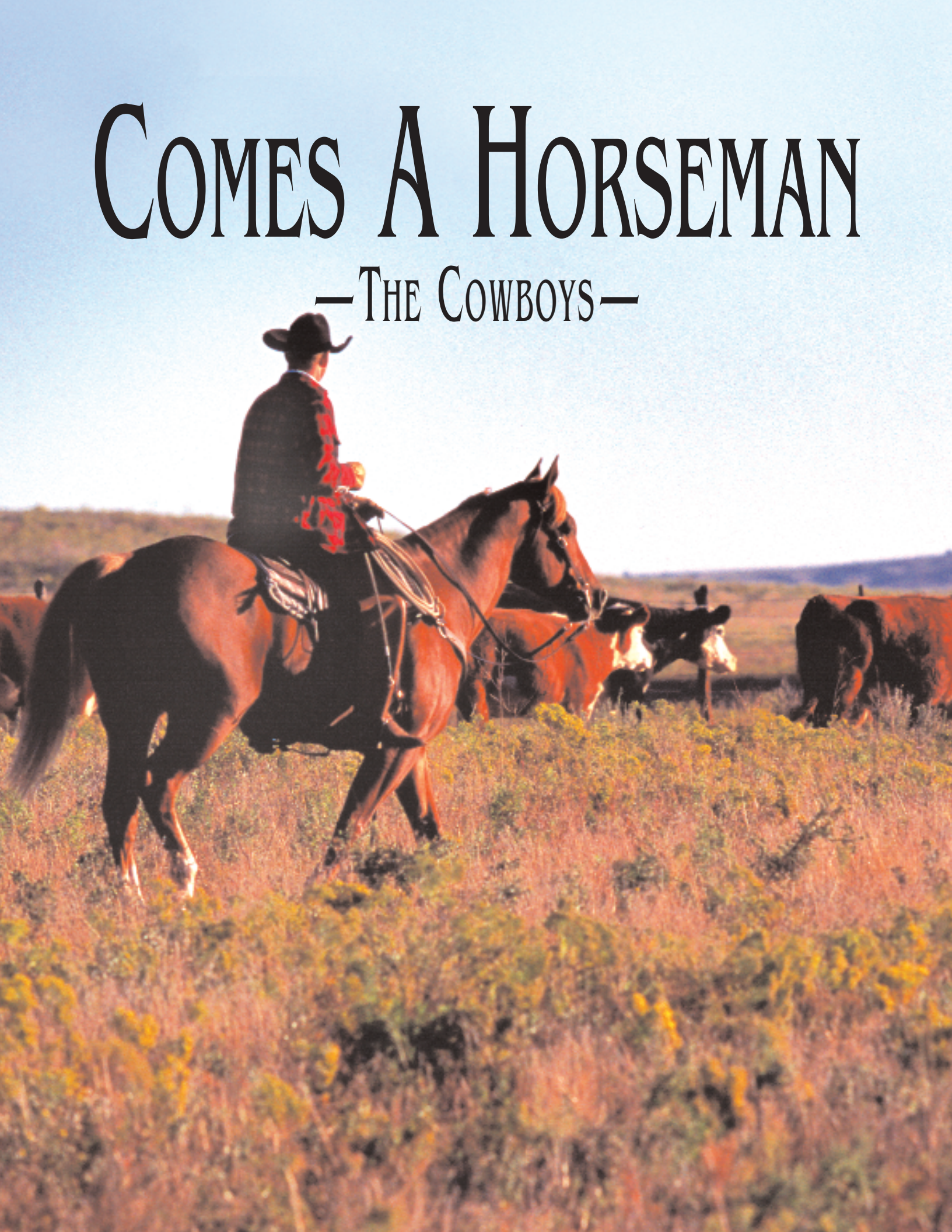
Comes A Horseman

—The Cowboys—



He was quick, he was tough, and most of all, willing—such was the all-American cow pony. Part IV of our series on horses follows the cowboy's constant companion as together they rode herd on the cattle trails and open range.

by Bobbie Athon

"To make a cow horse out 'a them, you get 'em used to everything. . . . A horse is only afraid of what he doesn't understand."

Photo by Harland J. Schuster

Once, long ago, a cowboy's worth was measured by the skill of his horse. A good equine understood a complex set of signals, or cues, from his rider and carried out his commands, time and again. A solid cow pony remained cool under pressure, concentrated in chaos, and endured in the worst of conditions. He asked only good care and good food, and in return he proved a trustworthy co-worker and companion.

Indeed, a good cow horse has always been worth his weight in gold. He was the vehicle that could make or break the man who made his living on the plains of the West. "With him under me," wrote longtime Flint Hills rancher Dan Casement of his horse Castaway, "I had the sensation of being Superman himself. In a cattle crisis, should I will to be either here or there, he instinctively transformed my will into instant action and there I was miraculously and seemingly without effort."

The role of the cow horse has changed since these animals first rode herd for the Mexican vaqueros (whose name derived from the Spanish vaca, meaning "cow"). Beginning in the 1860s cow horses drove cattle on the trails, worked on ranches, and displayed their skills and intelligence in rodeos. They have played as important a role in the history of the ranching industry as have the cowboys, ranchers, and trail herders.

Cowboy poets have immortalized many of these hard-working mounts in prose and

Courtesy Anschutz Collection

KIND, STEADY, PATIENT (Above) Beginning in the 1500s the Spanish *vaqueros* skillfully utilized the horse in their ranching operations. (Top right) Texas cowboys and their cow ponies drove thousands of cattle up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas during the 1860s–1870s. (Bottom right) A cowboy's work demanded long, lonely hours on the open range with little company other than his faithful horse. (Far right) A cow pony is "Gentle as a child and kind as a cooing dove," evident here as Bill Tenpenny of Topeka gives his daughter, Sam, a ride on his horse Harley.

(Page 6–7) Cattle round-up on the Merrill Ranch, Comanche County.

poetry. Of the "cowhoss," Oscar Rush wrote in The Open Range, he is "Gentle as a child and kind as a cooing dove; quick as a cat and surefooted as a mountain goat. He weighs ten hundred pounds and has brains enough to count money. He can turn around on a twenty-five cent piece and leave 15 cents in change. He's a good rope and cutting hoss. Some hoss, I'll tell the world!"

Hardy Spanish Barb horses probably began the genetic line of cow ponies in North and Central America. Arriving in the West Indies as early as the 1490s and in Mexico with the earliest conquistadors in 1519, the horse's stamina, speed, and durability on the vast plains made him invaluable to the developing ranching industry.

Over the next several centuries ranching prospered in Mexico, and the growing cattle herds required a greater number of horses. Vaqueros grew skillful in utilizing the horse for herding operations. When Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821, cattle ranching began to spread northward. Independent ranches (from the Spanish rancho, meaning "farm") soon appeared on the Texas plains, where cowboys learned all the necessary skills from the vaqueros.

As their own herds increased, Texas cattlemen began looking for new and greater markets. In the early 1860s the Chisholm Trail became an established trade route, and in 1867 a new stockyard in Abilene, Kansas, provided a railroad link with the trail. Soon cowboys and their cow ponies began driving thousands of Texas longhorns to Kansas, where inexpensive rail lines transported the stock to eastern buyers. The increased numbers of cattle coming up from Texas to Kansas cattle towns provided steady work for the cattle drover. Although the Texas cattle-driving days virtually had ended by the 1880s, ranches raising domestic cattle herds had by this time begun to develop in the Kansas grasslands. Ranches, often covering several thousand acres, required a number of cowhands to tend the herds.

A cowboy's work demanded long, lonely hours and days and weeks, out in the weather with little company other than his faithful horse. To accommodate life in the saddle and to protect themselves from the weather, cowboys adopted a distinctive style of dress that is readily recognized today. But their horses, too, needed specialized tack that was durable and offered protection, minimal irritation, and the most comfort for both animal and rider. The early vaqueros rode saddles with flat seats and simple

Courtesy Newhouse Galleries

stirrups that later evolved to become deeper and more secure. The saddles sat high off the horse's back to allow for airflow, and a cushion of blankets prevented chaffing. The saddlehorn needed to be strong enough to hold up to the rigors of roping and cutting. Saddles grew in size to provide more even distribution of the rider's weight, easing the load on the horse's back.

A cowboy on the plains required a special set of skills and a certain temperament, including the ability to work with animals. As one cowhand said, "I worked for outfits that if they catch ya' fightin' a horse—well, ya' just better go draw your pay." Most important, a handler recognized that his horse's needs always came first, even before his own. The mounts were groomed and brushed, and at the end of the day they were watered and fed before the men dished up their own grub. Some riders were so in tune with their horses that, to avoid scaring a sensitive mount, they claimed to nod and say "Howdy," rather than wave a salutation.

In an act of extreme confidence in their animals, cowboys rode with a loose rein, applying little pressure on the bit and thus allowing the horses the freedom to pick their own paths on the rough trail. At times this could be a difficult proposition for the horses, inasmuch as cow ponies often were unshod since blacksmithing supplies were cumbersome to transport. When commands were necessary, horses learned to respond to neck reining—two reins were held with one hand for steering, keeping the rider's other hand free to handle a lariat or wipe a brow. A good mount grew sensitive to the slightest pressure on one side or the other of his neck and responded quickly. On the early trail drives, however, horses spent most of their time taking their riders in a straight line. When all went well driving cattle, they might cover ten miles a day.

A cowboy had the responsibility to provide his own horses and tack, and it was advisable that he have two horses so the workload could be shared. He also needed a saddle, bridle, saddle blanket, picket-ropes, and two pairs of blankets, one for his own use; beyond that he was "independent of the world" except for food.

A good cow pony kept one eye on the cattle and one on the ground. Not every animal measured up to the task. A good working horse had to be sure-footed and sturdy, with sound feet, limbs, heart, and lungs, and he needed incredible endurance on the dry, rocky trail—a stumble could cause serious injuries to

Photo by Harland J. Schuster

Working as a Team Both horse and rider were expected to master the skills of cutting and roping cattle. (Above) Horses hold the ropes taut as cowboys brand cattle in Barber County, 1890s. (Left) A cow pony on the Merrill Ranch maneuvers through the herd, allowing his rider to easily toss a loop on a calf. (Facing page) As they have done through time, well-trained cutting horses separate the designated critters from the herd.

horse or rider. Even more crucial, perhaps, was common sense. "I know of no other work of a horse in which the leading requisite is brains," wrote one drover. "A horse's intelligence is an interesting study. There is a wonderful difference in them, and a gulf lies between the common and the top as wide as that found in man."

Both horse and rider were expected to master the skills of roping and cutting. Roping was a way to capture a calf for branding or medical treatment, while cutting singled out a larger animal for treatment. The good roping horse knew when his rider had the lasso ready to throw. Working as a unit, they maneuvered to the left side of a running calf, the mount staying even with but not passing the animal. As soon as the cowboy lassoed the calf, the horse slid to a stop, sitting back on his hind feet so his sheer weight would halt the captive and keep tension on the rope. The cowboy then quickly dismounted, threw the calf on its side, and tied its legs. The horse knew to just stand patiently by, keeping the rope taut and the calf still.

The skills for cutting were even more demanding. The cowboy selected an animal to "cut" from the herd and made his selection known to his mount by maneuvering him between the animal and its companions, carefully driving it to the edge of the herd. If the steer attempted to turn back, the horse responded quickly to continue cutting it off, eventually separating it from the other beeves. Good cutting horses knew what was required

of them and seemed able to do the job on their own. As one cowboy said, "When I'm workin' a cow with that ol' grey cuttin' horse, I'm just a passenger."

Exemplary horses sometimes became larger than life, creating legends of their success. Cutting horse Bosley Blue, for example, who lived and worked in Nebraska in the 1880s, could "do everything but read and cipher." Cowboys once reported spotting the riderless horse working amid a herd of fifteen hundred cattle. "D'reckly he cut out a big brindle steer," said one observer. "Blue seen him out of the corner of his eye, wheeled after him, got him on a straight run, grabbed his tail in his teeth, and with as purty a twist as you ever saw turned the steer a somersault. Then he deliberately set down on the steer and held him there for ten minutes."

Courtesy Robert Reynolds

Doc Burris considered his own dun cutting horse to be the best mount around. "All I had to do was to show Dun Man what brands I wanted cut out of a herd," Burris said. "Then I'd pull off saddle, briddle [sic], everything and dismount myself, and that dun horse would start in and cut out every critter wanted." Buck Gravis thought this dun horse had his limitations, but paired with his own bay horse, none could best them. "I generally put Dun to working in the herd and Bay on the outside," Gravis said. "Dun wasn't much on brands . . . but when it came to classifying cattle he was as smart as the top buyer for the packers in Kansas City. Bay meantime was working between the main herd and the cut, and whenever Dun brought out something, Bay would take it over and put it where it belonged."

Frank King often said that his fast but gentle gray pony, Toro, "could cut the baking powder out of a biscuit without breaking the crust." Dan Casement thought his Jack Paw "did his best to make a competent cow hand of me. In working a critter out of a bunch he gave me a sensation of having under me a powerful spring, tightly coiled and set for instant release. When on his back one felt capable of mastering whatever situation might arise no matter how impossible it seemed to be."

Just as with people, however, some horses went down in cowpoke lore for their monstrous misdeeds. One such challenge was Casement's mare Connemara. "I bought her," he wrote, "in fulfillment of a pledge made to the wife of my best friend. It was that I would give her a top riding horse when and if she found for me a receptive and acceptable mate." Although the beautiful little sorrel was "almost faultless in confirmation," she also had "a disposition so wilful [sic] as to be nigh unconquerable." For five years Casement labored to convert Connemara into a "suitable mount." During this time the mare "pitched with unmitigated energy and was adept at all the tricks of the trade."

The warm relationships between cowboys and their steeds

Courtesy Robert Reynolds

The Enduring Cow Pony (Above) Rodeos provide opportunities for riders to exhibit the talents developed on the range. This roping horse prepares to come to a sliding stop as the lasso settles over the calf's neck. (Facing page) Today's cow horse exists alongside the latest in technology, however no motorized vehicle can replace the heartfelt devotion between horse and rider. Here a duo heads down a dusty trail on the Merrill Ranch.

Did you know you can still experience today's western ranch horse? Kansas cow ponies are waiting to take you on trail rides and actual cattle round-ups. Check with any of the working cattle ranches listed below:

Flying W Ranch
Josh Hoy, owner
RR 1, Box 11
Cedar Point, KS 66843
620-274-4357

Hawthorne Ranch
Sally Hawthorne, owner
Box 161
Eureka, KS 67045
620-583-5887

JL Canyon Ranch
Jack Lill, owner
746 28th Road
Brookville, KS 67425
785-225-6782
www.jlcanyonranch.com

Moore Ranch
Nancy Moore, owner
RR 1, Box 17
Bucklin, KS 67834
620-826-3649
www.longhorn-cattle.com

became the stuff of western legend. The interaction between cattlemen and the farmers who settled the land, however, was not as harmonious. Cattle and cowboys roamed the open range until homesteaders and barbed wire kept the cattle from grazing and running through fields that had been cleared and tilled for planting. Fights ensued, and gradually ranchers were challenged with finding rangeland and water sources for their herds beyond continually expanding settlements. Still dissatisfied, farmers pressured Congress for help, which enacted legislation to ban livestock running at large. These laws effectively and permanently changed the life of the cowboy and cow pony.

By the late 1800s cowboys more often than not rode within the confines of fenced ranches. No longer slowed by long cattle drives, former drovers could pick up the pace, and in turn they sought faster, longer-legged horses. Sure-footedness, quickness, trust, and honesty, however, were still the main requisites of the ranch horse.

Although the days of the ranchers' sole dependence on horses have disappeared, cowboys and their mounts found ways to display their skills that they so enjoyed and at which they were so proficient. Rodeos (from the Spanish

word rodear meaning "to surround, encircle") provided opportunities for riders to exhibit the talents they had developed on the range. Rodeo shows developed as early as 1888, when spectators first paid to witness exhibitions in Prescott, Arizona. When William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody took his performances to Europe, the Wild West show became a worldwide sensation that continues in popularity today.

Only two of the five traditional rodeo events are rooted in ranch work. Calf roping, popular with spectators, offers both an individual and team-roping category. The saddle-bronc event simulates a cowboy's attempt to "break" a mount.

Even more accurate are the re-creations of ranch work in horse shows' western classes. In equitation competition judges rate riders on their riding abilities and how they handle a horse. The horse's performance, rather than the rider's, is judged in "pleasure" classes, and judges look for responsiveness as horses compete at a walk, jog trot, and lope. Stock horse, or reining, events require participants to perform running patterns of figure eights, flying lead changes, pivoting, and sliding stops. Trail classes, also simulating ranch work, require horse and rider to cross various obstacles they might encounter on the open trail.

Photo by Harland J. Schuster

Competitions are not the only outlet for cowboys and cow ponies today. Some ranchers still use horses in their operations—a drive through the Flint Hills or across the ranges of southwest Kansas, both primary ranching regions, will sometimes offer the traveler a glimpse of a ranch horse and rider checking the fence line or working a herd of cattle. Today's cow pony, however, exists alongside the latest in technology. Motorized vehicles of many types fill a part of the horse's role, while videos, teleconferencing, and the Internet connect sellers and buyers of livestock.

Yet, no ATV can elicit the heartfelt memorials that the cowboy has dedicated to his horse. From the earliest days of ranching, cow ponies—loyal and brave companions—worked closely with their human partners, and cowboys often remembered, with fondness, their favorite mounts, telling the world about them in poetry, song, and just plain loving words.

For one that never tires; one that's faithful, tried and true;
One that always is a 'stayer,' when you want to slam him through,
There is but one breed of critters that I ever came across
That will always stand the racket:
'Tis the Old Cow Hoss.

Editor's note: Our series "Comes a Horseman" will conclude in Autumn 2005 with an article about the horse's participation in competitions.

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